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ABSTRACT

General principles of history instruction at the community college level are presented in this essay. Suggested criteria for the teaching of history include emphasizing relevant, vital subject matter in ongoing lessons and units, and encouraging students to utilize primary as well as secondary data sources. Potential philosophies that the history instructor might wish to examine or adopt include problem solving, subject-oriented approaches, and utilization of measurably stated objectives. A 5-item list of references is provided. (DB)

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Teaching History in the Community College

Marlow Ediger

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TEACHING HISTORY IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The history teacher needs to have adequate course work on the undergraduate and graduate degree levels pertaining to his/her academic area of expertise. An interest in history as a profession is a must. To be a true professional in the teaching of history requires life-long study and learning. Continual study of history be it on university campuses or as research on the personal level should be emphasized as ongoing by the junior college instructor.

Selection of Subject Matter to be Taught

The junior college history instructor needs to select relevant content for student mastery in the classroom. Vital facts, concepts, and generalizations must be selected by the history teacher for students to acquire. There are no absolute standards to utilize in making these selections. A well educated historian with adequate deliberation might well select subject matter in history which has endured in time and space. Universal content is then in the offing for student acquisition.

History teachers on the junior college level need to discuss, analyze, and appraise which facts, concepts, and generalizations would be worthy to emphasize as objectives in the classroom. A series of meetings by history teachers would assist in clarifying vital content for junior college students to achieve. Trivial subject matter in history must be weeded out. With the explosion of knowledge in history, it behooves the junior college instructor to seek content which is vital and not inert. Content such as this should guide students to be able to

reconstruct the past, as well as understand the present more effectively.

The Psychology of Learning and the Teaching of History

The history teacher in the junior college needs to follow desired criteria when teaching students. First of all, history students must perceive purpose or values for learning. Thus, the history teacher should explain to students why selected content is salient for student acquisition. This assists learners to perceive values in studying selected subject matter. A deductive method of teaching is then emphasized. Purpose and value in acquiring historical facts, concepts, and generalizations may also be perceived inductively. With quality questions, history students might be guided to perceive value in studying selected content. If students in junior college history courses accept reasons for learning, increased achievement should be an end result.

Secondly, history teachers should present content in a stimulating manner. Junior college students, as a result, develop feelings of motivation. Motivation makes for increased energy levels for achievement in history. Appropriate voice inflection, enthusiasm for teaching of history, and quality eye-contact with students in the class setting are musts for the junior college teacher. A variety of activities in the teaching of history should also be stimulating for students to attain more optimally. Thus carefully selected textbooks (multiple or single series), video-tapes, video-discs, slides, films, filmstrips, transparencies, and discussions, as learning opportunities,

should meet needs of individual students in history. Each student should be guided to achieve as much as possible.

Thirdly, the junior college teacher must assist students to attach meaning to historical content presented. With meaningful learnings, students understand facts, concepts, and generalizations. Comprehending content presented by the history teacher is vital. Students also must apply what has been learned to a new situation. Relevant ideas achieved might be used again and again in a spiral history curriculum.

Pertaining to David Ausubel's theory of meaningful learning, Royer and Feldman ¹ wrote:

Ausubel's notion was that meaningful learning involves a process in which information is integrated into a previously established knowledge structure. The process of "subsuming" new information into an existing knowledge structure was said to be easier than memorizing meaningless material by rote. Moreover, meaningful material that is subsumed into a knowledge structure was said to be "anchored" in that structure, thereby making the information more resistant to forgetting than unanchored, meaningless material.

...When the term "meaningful learning" is used, it should be understood as the process whereby new information gets integrated into existing knowledge. Meaningful learning results in the state of understanding, which in turn allows the material that has been understood to be used in new learning situations.

Fourthly, students should be guided to utilize higher levels of cognition. Thus, within a discussion framework, junior college students must learn to analyze. To analyze, a learner must be able to separate the trivial from the relevant, the inaccurate from the accurate, and opinions from facts. After analyzing content, junior college students need to synthesize subject matter. Each generalization must be supported by vital facts. Generalizations should be evaluated in terms

of their comprehensiveness. Each generalization then has adequate supporting facts and is free from weak summaries and conclusions.

Fifthly, students in junior college history classes must receive guidance to utilize primary and secondary data sources. Primary sources represent eye-witness accounts of events by those directly on the scene of the happening or occurrence. The original item such as genuine antiques, coins, stamps, letters, diary entries, journals, newspaper accounts, autobiographies, court house records, and genealogies, among others, represent primary sources for student investigation in ongoing lessons and units in junior college history.

Secondary sources pertain to those that are a step removed from an eye-witness account. Thus, paraphrased content, reproductions, and models of the original might well be excellent for students to study in history. However, these are not primary sources of historical content. Most data sources such as textbook and workbook content, as well as audio-visual materials contain content classified as secondary sources. The junior college history teacher needs to assist students to utilize both primary and secondary data sources.

Sixthly, students should attain understandings, skills, and attitudinal objectives. Balance among these three categories of objectives must be an end result in the teaching of history. Understandings objectives stress students acquiring vital subject matter. Relevant content is then taught by the junior college history teacher. As a second category of objectives, learners need to achieve skills such as critical and creative thinking, as well as problem solving. Attitudinal goals, a third category of objectives, stress

students developing positive attitudes, feelings, and values toward history as an academic discipline. Each of these three categories of objectives affect a different category such as quality attitudes assist students to acquire more subject matter and needed skills in history.

The Philosophy of Teaching History

Junior college history instructors must examine and experiment with diverse philosophies of teaching history. As a first philosophy to be discussed, problem solving may be emphasized. Within a lesson or unit in history, students are stimulated to identify problems. Each problem must be clearly stated so that solutions may be sought. Data or information are then gathered, directly related to the problem. The data sources would be primary and secondary. After adequate data or information have been acquired, students with teacher guidance develop an hypothesis or answer to the problem. The hypothesis is tentative, not an absolute. Thus, each hypothesis needs testing, utilizing additional data sources. With testing, the hypothesis is modified, refuted, or accepted.

Problems in history, selected by students with instructor encouragement, assist the former to integrate acquired ideas to arrive at solutions. Subject matter is not learned for its own sake, but is instrumental to the solving of vital problems. In addition to history, other social science disciplines may also be needed in problem solving. Students then perceive knowledge as being related, rather than as isolated component parts.

Pertaining to thinking in problem solving, Dewey 2 wrote:

That the situation should be of such a nature as to arouse thinking means of course that it should suggest something to do which is not either routine or capricious -- something, in other words, presenting what is new (and hence uncertain or problematic) and yet sufficiently connected with existing habits to call out an effective response. An effective response means one which accomplishes a perceptible result, in distinction from a purely haphazard activity, where the consequences cannot be mentally connected with what is done. The most significant question which can be asked, accordingly, about any situation or experience proposed to induce learning is what quality of problem it involves.

As a second philosophy of teaching, the junior college history instructor may stress a subject centered approach. The goal of history teaching here is to emphasize historical content to be valuable for its own sake. History, as an academic area in general education, assists students to develop well intellectually. Stimulating content in history is presented in a challenging and motivating manner. Historical content guides students in mental development. Mind is real and needs development through a study of vital subject matter.

The instructor needs to utilize criteria of relevance, vitality, structure, and essentialism to select content in history representing the basics. A common core of content in history is necessary for all students to acquire. The core of knowledge represents the hallmarks of a well educated person.

Content in history is not vocational but rather academic, possessing intrinsic values. A broadly educated student in the general education sequence must have a history instructor who is highly academic, subject centered, and dedicated to his/her area of expertise.

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The junior college history instructor guides students from being finite to the infinite. A more adequate knowledge base for the junior college student in history should develop the individual to become increasingly adequate in the general education arena.

A third philosophy in teaching history advocates the utilization of operant conditioning and measurably stated objectives for students to achieve. Each objective is precisely stated. Thus after instruction, the history instructor measures if a student has or has not attained an objective. Observable results, not internal learnings, are wanted from learners to determine goal attainment. Involving operant conditioning, Schunk 3 wrote:

Operant conditioning is based on the assumption that features of the environment (stimuli, situations, events) set the occasion for responding. Reinforcement strengthens responses and increases their likelihood of occurrence when the stimuli are present. It is not necessary to refer to underlying physiological or mental mechanisms to explain behavior. The proper subject matter for psychological study is overt behavior.

The basic operant conditioning model is a three-term contingency involving a discriminative stimulus, response, and reinforcing stimulus. The consequences of behaviors are defined by their effects. Reinforcing consequences increase behavior; punishing consequences decrease behavior. Other important concepts are extinction, generalization, discrimination, primary and secondary reinforcers, and reinforcement schedules.

Shaping is the process used to alter behavior. Shaping involves differential reinforcement of successive approximations of the desired behavior. Complex behaviors are formed by chaining together successive three-term contingencies. Behavior modification programs have been commonly applied in diverse contexts to promote more adaptive behaviors.

The instructor announces clearly and concisely what is to be learned from each lesson presentation prior to instruction. Students then know exactly what is expected of them as a result of instruction.

In the announcement prior to instruction, students understand what is salient to learn. These learnings provide content for tests to be administered by the history teacher at designated intervals. Test items are objective, rather than subjective in nature. Thus, the instructor measures what students have learned. Items missed on the test by students provide data to the instructor as to specifics which need reteaching.

Test items align with the measurably stated objectives. The tests then tend to be valid and reliable if each item possesses clarity and meaning. Precision in measurement is salient. The junior college history teacher desires to know exactly how much content each student has mastered.

A fourth philosophy emphasizes rather heavy input from students in determining what is to be learned in history. Here, the instructor encourages students to raise questions within ongoing lessons and units. These questions may well provide scope and sequence in history. The history instructor might also ask students what they would want to discuss from the assigned reading for today. Students may become quite proficient in choosing questions for discussion, as well as to be active participants in this endeavor. Student-teacher planning is encouraged. The intrinsic interests, purposes, and goals of students are heavy determinants here in the history curriculum. Ozmon and Craver⁴ wrote:

The first thing that most existentialists want is a change in our attitude about education. Instead of seeing it as something a student is filled with, measured against, or fitted into, the existentialist suggests that we first look at students as individuals and that we allow them to take a positive role in the shaping of their own education and life. It is true that every student brings to school a background of

experiences that will influence personal decisions, but by and large existentialists urge that schools and other institutions be free places where students are encouraged to do things because they want to do them.

In Closing

Definite criteria exist which must be followed in teaching of history. Thus the junior college instructor needs to

1. emphasize relevant, vital subject matter in ongoing lessons and units.
2. encourage students to utilize primary as well as secondary data sources.
3. stress student purpose, interest, and meaning in ongoing lessons and units.
4. advocate balance in objectives to be achieved by students.

Three kinds of objectives then should be attained by students which are understandings, skills, and attitudes.

Possible philosophies to emphasize in teaching history include

1. problem solving.
2. subject centered approaches.
3. utilization of measurably stated objectives.
4. student-teacher planning.

Each student should attain optimally in history. Teaching strategies need development and implementation which guide learners in desiring to learn as much as individual capabilities permit.

Winkler 5 wrote:

Can historians be truly objective when they write about the past?

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That question, posed about research in many areas of the humanities, was hotly debated here at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association.

Ever since the 19th century, mainstream historians have assumed scholarly interpretation is objective -- a non-biased and accurate reflection of the past. But that belief, some scholars said, is now being shattered by the fragmentation of historical research and by current theories that knowledge is subjective.

"We should disregard far-reaching claims to objectivity," Peter Novick, a professor of history at the University of Chicago, told an audience of more than 500 scholars. "We don't have to be definitive; we can just be interesting or suggestive."

A number of other speakers, however, disagreed. They said that historians had been less swayed by theoretical controversies over objectivity than had researchers in many other disciplines.

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